

Prince House,  
Lawrence St. and Northern Blvd.,  
Flushing, L.I. New York.  
Queens Co.

HABS No. 4-19

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4  
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,  
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

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THE PRINCE HOUSE  
Northern Boulevard and Lawrence Street, Flushing,  
Long Island, New York.

Location, Date and History

As one motors into Flushing, Long Island, across the drawbridge, this large, distinguished looking house is seen near the end of Bridge Street. It was built about the middle of the eighteenth century by William Prince, son of Robert Prince, whose skill in botany and horticulture made him one of the greatest as well as one of the first disciples of Linnaeus in America.

Robert started the Prince Nurseries in the early part of the eighteenth century (1737). They later became known as "The Linnaean Botanic Garden and Old American Nursery." Although descendants of Thomas Prince, one of the governors of Plymouth Colony, the distinguished ancestor of Robert and William Prince is forgotten as we trace their own self-reliant enterprise in the scientific pursuit of developing an industry vital to the success of the infant Colonies.

Robert Prince, a Huguenot, was one of the first settlers in Flushing, and with his great natural fondness for all good things that grow in fertile soil, he started gardens there and widely advertised his business. He and his son later issued catalogues which became popular treatises on the cultivation of the soil and its useful products, and thus taught the struggling Colonists how to win a living on the farm.

William Prince's eighty acres in Flushing were more than an horticultural experiment station. Robert, and his son after

him, imported or acquired from travelers from all parts of the world specimens of fruitful trees, shrubs, vegetables, and flowers that they might propagate these new species here and sell them broadcast throughout America and even in foreign lands. (Overton, Long Island's Story, 1929, pp.187-188.)

When William built the house, which was to become a Mecca for agricultural enthusiasts, it was in the midst of his vineyards, orchards, flower gardens and fertile fields. There were two entrances to the gardens, one in front of the residence and the other on the south side of Bridge Street. During the Revolution, General Lord Howe stationed troops at both gates to protect the property; nevertheless, 3000 cherry trees were cut down and used for firewood or sold for other purposes. The nurseries also were badly damaged. (Eberlein, Manor Houses and Historic Homes of Long Island and Staten Island, 1928, p. 174.)

When the young sailor-prince, William Henry, Duke of Clarence, came to New York during the War -- the first person of Royal lineage to visit America -- he went to Flushing on August 1, 1782, to present a stand of colors to the King's American Dragoons encamped three miles to the east. He visited the house and gardens as the guest of William Prince, and the soldiers were given a barbecue feast -- an ox roasted whole, "spitted on a hickory sapling supported on crotches and turned by handspikes." (Overton, above cited, p. 150-1.)

After the War, when New York was the Federal as well as the State Capitol, President Washington, himself a scientific and successful farmer both on his private estate and commercially

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visited the Prince Gardens on one of his tours and was entertained at this house. His purpose was to learn the agricultural conditions of the country. This is the brief entry he made in his diary under date of October 10, 1789, regarding his visit: "I set off from New York about 9 o'clock in my barge to visit Mr. Prince's fruit gardens and shrubberies at Flushing." (The Writings Of George Washington, Ford ed., under that date.); also Diary of Geo. Washington, 1789-1791 Lessing Edition, 1860.

Some idea of the magnitude attained by this industry as conducted by William Prince after the War, is seen in the following advertisements published in December, 1798:

Lombardy Poplars.  
Ten thousand Lombardy poplar trees, from 10 to 17 foot in height, for sale by William Prince, Long Island. Orders left at Messrs. Gaine and TenEyck Printing Office in Pearl street will be attended to.

(Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register, December 8, 1798.)

Or this:

Fruit Trees,  
For sale by William Prince,  
At Flushing, Long Island, near New York,  
A large assortment of best grafted apple trees, pears, plums, cherries, nectarines, and apricot trees, quince, mulberry, and fig trees, a variety of the best currants, goosberries [sic], raspberries, [sic] and strawberries, Lombardy poplars of a large size, horse chesnut [sic], black walnut, weeping willows, and other ornamental trees, a variety of roses and flowering shrubs, and plants; catalogues of which may be had at Messrs. Gaine and Ten Eyck's Printing office, Pearl-street, w[h]ere orders left will be attended to, and the trees, if required, packed in mats, casks, or boxes, so as to be sent to Europe, or the West Indies with the greatest safety.  
(Commercial Advertiser, Dec. 4, 1798.)

The Lombardy poplar, introduced into this country in 1790, was successfully planted extensively in cities, notably

in New York, before and after 1800, to ornament and shade the streets. (See Index to Stokes's Iconography of Manhattan Island, title "Lombardy Poplar.")

The development of the gardens and vineyards by the Prince family in Flushing during those early years and the first quarter of the nineteenth century is a fascinating special study which here can be only briefly indicated.

There is considerable historical interest in the fact that William Robert Prince, son of William Prince, introduced to America nearly all of the Japanese trees we know. "The oldest Japanese ginko tree in the country still 1929 shades the porch of the Prince homestead with its fanlike leaves. As soon as Commodore Perry opened the way for trade with Japan, Prince Nurseries began to get out trees. Long before that they had been importing trees from China." (Overton, above cited, p. 188.) It will be remembered that when Li Hung Chang visited New York he planted a ginko tree at Grant's Tomb, in honor of General Grant whom he had met when Grant visited China.

Prince's Nurseries thrived and their territory was extended until 1860. When the opening of new streets began through that well favored part of Long Island about that time, the area of the gardens was gradually reduced as lots were sold for building purposes. Today only the residence and the home grounds remain. (Ibid.)

#### Architecture of the House

"After all William Prince and his sons did to beautify Flushing and the country at large, it seems unbelievable, as the town has grown into a city, no care has been taken to

protect the fine old homestead and garden or keep it as a landmark. Today it is a sad sight, going to rack and ruin. Only the remnants and garden and orchard keep faith with those who planted with such care and thought a generation or more ago. In spite of choking weeds and neglect they bravely struggle to bloom each spring." (Overton, Long Island's Story, 1929.)

A few years ago one could easily imagine how fine this house was and how lovely its setting. Although business buildings had sprung up along Northern Boulevard, the Prince House stood, a landmark from other times. On ground some three feet above the street level, a fine hedge of box trees on either side of the walk leading to the front entrance, and with tall shade trees and luxuriant shrubs all around, it was a lone reminder of the days when this section of the city was more sparsely settled, when it was out in the real country with other country houses and farms beyond.

Today the land on which the Prince House stands is owned by two different parties. In fact, the line dividing the property goes through the house in such a way that it too is divided into two parts, each owned separately. The grounds are still neglected. The box hedge is gone. The trees are dying. The shrubbery is scraggly. An automobile repair shop has been built in front of the house, on the street. The house also is still neglected; the shutters are falling to pieces, and the woodwork lacking paint is decaying.

It is very probable that originally there was not the porch which runs around three sides of the house, although

no information verifying this assumption could be obtained. There is, however, some evidence on the rear of the east wall that the kitchen wing was probably only one story high and that the second story was added later.

An interesting feature in the plan is the hallway which runs through the house from front to rear without being interrupted by the staircase, which is placed in a separate little hallway. While there still remains some good paneling and wood trim inside the house, perhaps the most interesting architectural feature is the south front with its fine pediment and beautiful oval window filled with leaded glass.

(From observations of Wm. Dewey Foster, Director of Southern New York District, H.A.B.S.)

Written, May 22, 1934, by

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*Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.*